



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Women](#) at sacbee.com.

Help for abused but undocumented women

Lawyers explain recent law changes to CSUS workshop for social workers and law enforcement.

By Susan Ferriss -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Sunday, February 26, 2006

Bucking rising sentiment against illegal immigrants, Congress recently voted to increase protections for undocumented immigrants trapped in abusive relationships or sex-trade networks.

President Bush signed these amendments into an existing law in January, giving abused undocumented women greater options for obtaining legal status and escaping perilous circumstances, according to two attorneys who spoke Friday in Sacramento at a workshop for social workers and law enforcement representatives from around the state.

The attorneys work for the Washington, D.C.-based Legal Momentum group. They helped craft the amendments to the 1994 Violence Against Women's Act that were approved by Congress in December.

The additions to the law also expand the rights of foreign women who enter the United States after meeting spouses through marriage services or the Internet.

Other legislation in the works, however, would tighten rules on undocumented immigrants. The House of Representatives voted in December to approve a sweeping immigration reform law that would make illegal status in

the United States a felony and increase penalties against employers for hiring undocumented workers. The legislation still requires Senate review.

"There are people who are not traditionally immigrant friendly (in Congress), but they do care about crime victims," said attorney Leslye Orloff, who led the workshop at California State University, Sacramento.

The Violence Against Women Act already allowed many immigrants, including married undocumented women, to come forward to petition for legal status and a work permit if they could prove they were abused.

But the law left out some categories of people, including undocumented women who were not legally married, said Joanne Lin, who also works at Legal Momentum.

One of the key amendments, Lin said, lifts a restriction on the ability of legal aid groups to help undocumented women not married to their abusers.

Some abusive men control girlfriends or fiancées they've brought into the United States by threatening to call authorities to deport them, Orloff and Lin said.

Tammi Wong, staff attorney for Legal Services of Northern California in Sacramento, recalled the case of Cambodian woman who entered the U.S. on a fiancée visa requested by an American citizen.

The woman brought her children from a previous marriage, also on visas. The man never married her and abandoned her and the children.

"Their visas all expired and they all became undocumented," Wong said.

Under the 2005 amendments, Orloff said, U.S. citizens who petition to obtain visas for fiancées must disclose criminal records to the Department of Homeland Security. Officials are required to forward that information to a fiancée.

Another change prohibits U.S. citizens from asking for fiancée visas multiple times after divorces.

"One of our clients is not even divorced yet and her husband is already listing himself on the Internet" to look for another foreign bride, said Nilda Valmores, director of My Sister's House in Sacramento, which offers shelter and counseling to immigrant women primarily from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Orloff and Lin said domestic abuse among undocumented immigrants is so widespread that the Department of Homeland Security has staff that specializes in screening victims.

Clear guidelines, the two attorneys said, reduce the possibility of fraudulent claims while making the criteria for judging petitions more uniform.

About the writer:

- The Bee's Susan Ferriss can be reached at (916) 321-1267 or sferriss@sacbee.com.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000
Copyright © [The Sacramento Bee](#), (916) 321-1000